FAITH—
WHEN THE WATER IS CHOPPY
AND YOUR BOAT IS SINKING
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Psalm 9:9–20
Mark 4:35–41

"Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"
Mark 4:40 (NRSV)

How good and pleasant it is, O God, to be here, together, on a clear beautiful June morning. How good to turn to you on this first day of a new week so full of promise and opportunity. Yet, we confess, beneath the surface we are concerned, worried, anxious this morning about aspects of life that feel out of our control and that threaten us or people we love. And so we also hope to hear a word of encouragement and peace and courage. Startle us with your love that will never let us go, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We're not quite sure what to do with stories like this one, are we—the disciples in a boat in a storm, Jesus asleep, Jesus ordering the storm to be still? Ministers are often asked in a good-natured way if we can't do something about the weather on the day of the church picnic, for instance, or for an outdoor commencement exercise or a wedding. Fathers of the bride sidle up after the rehearsal on a rainy Friday evening and say, "Come on now, Reverend. You must have some pull upstairs. Can't you do something about the weather and get us a sunny day tomorrow?" And over the years we learn to smile and respond, "Sorry, I'd love to help, but I can't. I'm in sales, not production." We know and they know that the weather—wind and rain, sun and fog—is produced by huge atmospheric conditions, troughs of high pressure and low pressure systems represented by those wonderfully dramatic graphs and diagrams, colorful lines, and arrows the weather person on television uses, not by our prayers—or anyone else's for that matter.

So one of my suspicions after years of doing this is that the average Presbyterian hears a story like this one and at some level simply stops listening. Things like that don't happen, after all, and there's nothing the preacher can say that will make me believe it happened. So we stop listening, put our mind in neutral, and hope that the preacher will choose a text that makes a little sense next time.

There is a huge issue here, a deeply profound issue of the relationship of the creator to the creation. Can God intercede in natural processes? Is that what God's sovereignty means, and if so, why doesn't God do it more consistently? Or did God set it all up and then sit back to watch stuff happen—wonderful, marvelous, tragic, and terrible—prevented from interceding by the very natural processes God created? It's a big issue, but for now let's think about those men on the boat and the storm.

Fred Craddock, one of the very distinguished preachers and teachers of preaching in our day, says that when his students at Emory University get to a story like this one, they get silly and make bad jokes about Jesus walking on the water by stepping on stones. And so Craddock confronts the dilemma directly. Let's get in a circle, he says, and get us some plastic garbage bags and throw in everything we don't believe. It will be quite a pile and at the end of the process, once we've rid ourselves of all the material we don't believe, we will have to ask what it is that we do believe. And I thought of another step in this important winnowing process. Before we haul away the material we no longer believe, let's take each item out, pick it up, examine it one more time, and ask if there might be any truth we are about to discard, any hopeful, helpful truth about ourselves and our lives and the world and God that is in that little item that we are close to discarding. And my sense is that we will retrieve most of what we were about to discard and put it back in place reverently, particularly this little story.

Meanwhile we have these men in a boat in the middle of a raging storm, hard-working, blue collar men who know about physical challenges, who aren't afraid of much in life, but at the moment they're scared to death. They think they're going to die. Some are furiously rowing, some are bailing because the sea is coming over the top each time they head into a wave, and some are tugging at the sail, which is now almost useless. Someone still has the rudder, and they're all hinking about their wives and children and what they never got around to doing and saying in their short lives. They think this is it.

Jesus is asleep. Asleep? How in the world does a man sleep in the stern of that little boat? So they shake him awake. "Don't you care that we're about to go down? How about helping out a little bit, doing what you can?" And he does—says "Peace! Be still!" And it stops. Calm, order, peace is restored.

The truth? Well, for one thing, in that world, 2,000 years ago, the water the little boat was floating on was the abode of demons, what Craddock calls "the enemies of all that is good and right." Water means chaos and threat. In the beginning—before the beginning, the Bible says—"the earth was a formless void" and it was all water and God created by bringing order, by

separating the water. The psalmists write of Leviathan, the sea monster that lurks in the deep. When Moses leads the people to freedom, it is by separating the water and leading them through the sea.

Some of that primal fear is still in us. Two books and the motion picture based on them tapped into that fear. *The Perfect Storm* and, before that, *Jaws* tapped into a fear as old as the human race. Who, after reading and seeing *Jaws* years ago, has ever been totally comfortable swimming in the ocean? Not me.

But we don't believe there are demons in the water anymore. We don't jump off the high dive and shout, "Look out for demons," Craddock quips. And then helpfully asks, "If they aren't in the water, where are they?" and suggests that our demons are located where our fears are. Fear may be the demon, the enemy of all that is good and right and hopeful. When we act out of fear, we do sad and tragic things. The people of Israel and Palestine live in daily fear of what the other side might do. Perhaps that's what each intends. And Israeli leaders and the Palestinian organizations act out that fear by responding to each other's violence with even more horrific violence. Fear of terrorism can be as demonic as the terror itself and in a strange way gives victory to the terrorists. Fear of loneliness can cause us to establish unhealthy relationships. Fear of insecurity can make us timid, cautious. Fear of what might happen can cause us to lower our sights, pull in our hopes, and live a fraction of the life to which we are called.

The early church loved this story. In fact, one of the earliest symbols of the Christian church is a ship heading into a storm. The early church knew what it meant to be in a little boat in a stormy sea. Small, insignificant, a tiny minority in every city, and then tormented, persecuted, hunted down, arrested, tortured, executed by the most powerful entity in the world, the Roman Empire—the early church loved this story of the disciples in the boat and Jesus calming the storm. They heard in that story that they weren't alone in that boat. They had each other and they had Jesus, who was very much in the boat with them and whose commitment to them produced calm and comfort and peace even in the midst of the most violent of storms.

Thinking about this story again led me back to a little book a friend of mine gave me several years ago. He's a good friend, a former U.S. Navy officer, a physician, and a fine sailor, who taught me all I know about sailing, which isn't very much actually but enough to appreciate what it is like to be afloat on the ocean, under sail. The book is *First You Have to Row a Little Boat* by Richard Bode. It's about the author's lifelong love of boats and sailing. and it's about what sailing has taught him about life and t occasionally about ultimate things.

Sailing, Bode says, taught him about “the relationships between myself and the elements over which I had no control. You have to use whatever the weather gives you. You can’t control it” (p. 3).

Sailors know that we live with the illusion that we are in control, the “presumption of dominion.” “We believe we own the world, that it belongs to us, that we have it under our firm control.” But the sailor knows all too well the fallacy of this view.

“The hurricane, the typhoon, the sudden squall—they are all sharp reminders of the puniness of man when measured against the momentous forces of nature. We are not in total charge of our fate. We are subject to death, accident, disease. We can, without warning lose love, work, home” (p. 24).

That’s what happened to Richard Bode. First his parents died. Then his thirty-year marriage ended. Bode reflects that a kindly Sunday school teacher taught him “that there was a grand design, that an all-knowing deity ruled heaven and earth with a purpose in mind. I wanted to believe her: it was a comfort to think that what she said was true. But the more I sailed the more convinced I became that she deluded herself, that life was a lot more confused and chaotic than she dared to admit” (p. 90).

One of the significant sources of the unhealthy stress that is epidemic in modern life is the reality that we aren’t in control very much. Chicago weather this spring has been dreadful, and we can’t do much except complain. Driving about the city is a reminder that we are not in control. No matter how we calculate travel time to O’Hare, it’s wrong. Leave lots of time for traffic on the Kennedy and there is none and I’m at the airport with more time than I want. Ratchet it down for the next trip and it’s bumper to bumper all the way, which means a very tense ride and nearly missing a flight. Noise, fumes, pollution, sirens, street construction, random crime: we know well what it’s like to be in a little boat in a big storm.

And sometimes chaos comes even closer and the demonic enemies of all that is good and right loom up in front of us.

> A young woman, skillfully balancing demands of profession, marriage, and parenting, hears the physician say, “Sorry, it’s malignant” and faces surgery and treatment and an unknown future.
>
> A little boy with hemophilia lives and copes with a daily fear that any one of the hundreds of falls and bumps and scrapes that regularly occur in the life of an active six-year-old can mean a trip to the emergency room and painful shots.

A marriage that started the way all marriages do with the highest and holiest of hopes and love and laughter and passion slowly dies and painfully ends.

An elderly parent in another city, alone, falls, breaks a hip.

A promising career ends twenty years too soon.

The company is bought out, employees laid off.

The stock market falls, pension security disappears.

A Down Syndrome child struggles every day to keep up, struggles to speak, spell, understand, run, play.

“We aren’t in charge. . . . We are subject to accident, disease, death. We can without warning lose love, work, home,” Richard Bode wrote. And I heard this week about an old friend, an Episcopal priest just my age, who sat down to watch the evening news a few weeks ago with his wife, who said she didn’t feel well and stretched out on the couch and died, without warning.

Sometimes the storm is violent and life threatening. We’re all in the boat, Fred Craddock says. “Some of us are rowing, some are bailing, some are pulling at the sail, some are praying.” We can whistle and sing. We can give pep talks to each other, “We can make it, we can make it,” which helps a lot, because we are in the boat together.

But you know what? There’s somebody else in the boat with us, back there in the stern, not far from the tiller actually, quiet, but present with all the strength and courage and peace of God in him.

And the truth of this story is that there is no storm, no threat, no chaos that can undo us or negate us or destroy us because he is there with us. The truth is that the Lord of the universe, Almighty God, is in the boat and therefore, no matter what is going on, we are ultimately safe; although all hell, literally, is breaking loose, we are safe in his presence and his love.

The truth of this story is that the young mother, the little boy, the distraught spouse, the lonely patient, the unemployed executive, the priest suddenly painfully alone, the little girl struggling every day to keep up, all of them have a friend, a companion, who stands beside them and encourages and loves and blesses them. Jesus Christ is his name.

Elam Davies died two weeks ago. We will hold a ,emorial service for him this Thursday at 4:00 p.m. He was the pastor of this church from 1961 until

his retirement in 1984. It was my very great privilege to follow him as pastor, to benefit from his faithful ministry, to learn from him, and to enjoy his friendship. Some of you remember him well. Many of you came to Fourth Presbyterian Church after he was gone and did not have the privilege, the pleasure, of hearing him preach. *Time* magazine called him one of the great preachers in the world. He was a master orator, rhetorician, story teller, and he was also a consummate scholar. His sermons were extraordinary. And through the turbulent 60s and 70s, when many urban mainline churches were in full decline or closing their doors and heading for the suburbs, Fourth Church remained strong and vigorous on this intersection.

When he arrived in 1961, Elam inherited a church very different from what we are today. A symbol of the difference was the pew rental system, which was still in effect. I believe Fourth Church was the last major urban church in the country to rent pews. The result, of course, was that visitors and those who could not afford the rent sat in the back. Elam ended that and in addition led this congregation to look outward to its neighbors. Under his leadership, the Tutoring Program began as did the Center for Older Adults and the Counseling Center and the Day School and the Social Service Center that bears his name. How very appropriate that today we will talk about ambitious plans for our future—here on this site and on a new site for mission activity on Chicago Avenue. I shared those plans with him as recently as a month ago, and he approved.

When Judith Schneider, his daughter, and I discussed the memorial service, she gave me some of the papers Elam had assembled for the use of whoever was planning his memorial. Among them I found this, in his handwriting, ascribed to St. Francis:

> "All my life thou hast been at the helm though very secretly."

That is the truth of this little story.

I like to think about what happened next, during the rest of the voyage. Mark doesn't tell us, but I'll bet they breathed a huge sigh of relief, stretched their aching muscles, maybe recounted the most harrowing moments, and maybe even laughed a little bit at what an incredible night it had been. And as the sun rose, I'll bet they stole a glance at him sitting there in the stern.

Mark says, "they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'"

It's Jesus. God's only Son. God's love—from which nothing, no storm, can separate us—in the boat with us.

All praise to him.

Amen.